

Community Empowerment: Keys to Success

The Empowerment Zones/Enterprise Communities Program seeks to enhance long-term community development by empowering communities and citizens to promote development using local resources. But empowerment may be hard to visualize, and even harder to achieve.

- Is your community focusing on the long-term vision in its strategic plan, or is it preoccupied with projects?
- Are community organizations and citizens finding active roles in implementing the plan, or are a few groups and individuals running the process?
- Is the community making a special effort to build its capacity to promote development without Federal help, or is it focused on spending the SSBG funds?

Here are some things your community can do to succeed in becoming empowered.

Some Keys to Success

Community empowerment means far more than having access to the Social Services Block Grants and other financial resources available to designated EZ/EC communities. Empowerment means enabling poor communities to build the capacity and the confidence to succeed at development using their own resources and the help of other partnership organizations. How do you achieve empowerment? There is no single formula; each community will have to succeed in its own way. But, here are some "keys to success" to keep in mind as your community struggles with the day-to-day challenges of making empowerment work.

1. Your strategic plan is your guide; stick with it.

Your strategic plan is the written version of your community's vision for where it wants to go, and how it plans to get there. The plan incorporates decisions your community made about approaches to take, and those to postpone or ignore altogether. And, it embodies your community's strategy for moving from early successes to long-term enhancements. Resources for development are limited and straying from your roadmap increases your chances of getting lost.

2. If conditions change, update your plan

Although your community's plan was built for 10 years, nobody can see that far into the future with accuracy. Conditions change. Some of your programs will succeed; others will merit rethinking. To keep your plan vital, you should amend it when it begins to get out of date.

3. Use your SSBG funds carefully

The Social Services Block Grants (SSBG) awarded to EZ/EC's are special funds. You already have them; you don't have to compete for them again. Because SSBG funds are already "in hand," the temptation is to use them instead of going to the trouble to apply for other programs. But, communities that use their SSBG funds wisely can stretch them out by out by attracting other dollars ("leveraging").

By doing this, you will get the most value out of these precious funds.

4. Community strength comes through teamwork: keep your team together

Long-term success will not occur through the efforts of a few community leaders, no matter how well-intentioned. Communities succeed by acting as a whole--as communities. In order to build strength to last into the future, you will need to keep your community together.

5. Think and act as one region, not separate communities

Many EZ/EC's are made up of many towns and counties. Often, historical rivalries have made it difficult for communities to work together. But, most rural communities are too small to succeed on their own in the modern world. To overcome this, rural communities must think beyond their own borders and act together--regionally.

6. Build active partnerships, inside and outside your community

Long-term success in rural communities depends on building partnerships with organizations that have resources--funds, knowledge, organization, commitment--that can be used to foster community development. EZ/EC is your community's chance to establish partnerships that will last well after the 10-year EZ/EC initiative.

7. Build your capacity to succeed over the long run

More important even than creating jobs and providing services is building your community's ability to carry out development actions on its own. At the end of the 10-year period, your community will be "graduated"; what you learn during this period, and the skills you develop, will determine whether, in the long run, you and this Initiative have succeeded.

8. Keep community residents informed, and involved

Your own citizens are your biggest assets. In empowered communities, they bring willing hands and open minds to the development process. No community can become empowered without active citizen involvement. Keep them informed, and look for ways to keep them involved.

9. Manage your programs, and your resources, effectively

Your community is one of a small number who were chosen to lead the Nation in using the empowerment approach to development. What you do and how you act will be subject to close national scrutiny. To assure that the EZ/EC initiative is not brought into disrepute, it is critical that you do nothing to hurt its reputation. Even more, you must manage your resources in a way that proves that even small communities like yours merit the confidence the Nation has placed in you to succeed.

10. Build the self-discipline to sustain your development program over a long time

Community empowerment is a long-term process. Poverty took generations to create; it will take years, perhaps decades, to overcome. Prepare yourself and your community for a long-term process by building an organization and partnerships that will work over a period of years. Also, develop your ability to learn from your mistakes and to change your plans to meet new challenges.

Additional copies are available from the Office of Community Development, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Room 701, 300 7th Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20024 (1-800-645-4712). Copies may also be obtained at

<http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/ocd>